

BYZANTINE SOCIETY

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1969

PETER CHARANIS

“BYZANTINE Society,” the theme of the 1969 Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, may have seemed in advance to some of the invited scholars rather too general in scope, especially since no chronological limits were set. In actual fact, however, each paper presented proved to have its own focusing restrictions, restrictions imposed not only by the particular subject, but also by the emphasis of its author, the significance that he sought to attach to particular aspects of his subject, the care that he took to specify the period during which the conditions he described obtained, and more generally, the availability of information. Thus, the papers constituted an aggregate of specialized discussions contributing to a quite broad, overall picture of the social structures which obtained in the Byzantine Empire.

In all, eight papers were delivered; of these seven related to the Empire as a whole. The eighth, that by André Guillou, entitled “Byzantine Society in Southern Italy,” was limited to Byzantine Italy. The substance of Guillou’s paper was that a study of records relating to demography, settlements, and dwellings, as well as an examination of manuscripts, architecture, and the decoration of monuments, establishes the existence of continued exchanges among the population of the three Byzantine themes (Longobardia, Lucania, and Calabria) in southern Italy, and also between them and the Greek inhabitants of the neighboring Lombard territories. This continued exchange gave rise to a common societal pattern in Byzantine Italy. The study shows also that contacts between Byzantine Italy and the Peloponnesus, Hellas, Epirus, Macedonia, and Constantinople continued uninterruptedly from the ninth century to the middle of the thirteenth, when stagnation set in. Guillou’s entire paper is to be published in a book he is now writing, entitled *Recherches*

sur la civilisation d’une province byzantine: l’Italie du sud.

A paper on the aristocracy was presented by George Ostrogorsky and is published in the present volume. Wealth, service, personal connections—these were the basic elements in the rise of the aristocracy in Byzantium. Its growing importance, beginning with the tenth century, may be said to be the most significant dimension of the internal history of the Empire. Under the Comneni the aristocracy, despite its wide influence, was held somewhat in check by the fact that the most important positions were occupied by members of that great family. Nevertheless, the Empire was rapidly being feudalized; magnates tended more and more to exercise independent power to defy the central government, to have their own suites and their own private armies. The basis for this development was the *pronoia*, an institution widely used by the Comneni and still more widely by their successors. The aristocracy were members of the Greek Orthodox Church, and Greek was their cultural predilection. Yet, there were some aristocrats of foreign origin who did not wholly trust the Greeks.

A paper, “Scholars, Bureaucrats, and Intellectuals,” given by Basil Laourdas, reviewed the intellectual life of the Empire. At no time during the long chronological span of the Byzantine Empire did intellectual activity wholly cease. The intellectuals and scholars as a group were not numerous, but they were important. They tended more and more to compose the Byzantine bureaucracy in its higher echelons. Indeed, intellectual and scholarly achievement was often put forth as a claim for position and honor. What made one an intellectual was a knowledge of the Greek classical tradition. As Laourdas put it: “Basically, no Byzantine educated man—be he a metropolitan, a bureaucrat, or even a member

of the royal court—would dare to move in Byzantine society at any time without some knowledge of classical learning.” Dissent in the form of heresy was a stimulant to learning. Dogma never ossified, and, in the struggle to give it meaning, both losers and winners “relied always on the Greek classical tradition for their arguments.”

The Byzantine Empire as a whole was a multi-nation state. As a consequence, it is not always easy for the scholar to determine who among its inhabitants were considered foreigners. In a paper entitled “Foreigners in Byzantium,” Robert S. Lopez responded to this question by showing that Byzantium inherited from Rome certain basic assumptions about citizenship and alienation: On the one hand, for the sake of expedience the barbarians might be called friends, but not really trusted; on the other hand, any barbarian who made his home within the Empire and adopted its religion and way of life was considered assimilated. These assumptions were gradually undermined by the necessity of granting special privileges to foreign mercenaries and traders who should not accept assimilation, and even more by the “disassimilation” of Byzantine citizens of peripheral towns such as Venice and Amalfi. Ultimately there came a clash between the Byzantine idea of peaceful coexistence with people of foreign origin—assimilation and naturalization—and the Latin idea of mutual respect in autonomous communities living side by side. The Latins were the stronger, and in the long run they wrecked the Empire and were involved in its ruin.

The indigenous minorities of the Byzantine Empire were the heretical groups and the Jews. Scholars, including the present writer, have generally followed C. Holl in seeing in the heresies of Asia Minor a close connection between religious non-conformity and cultural alienation from the Graeco-Roman tradition. Without doubt, the Paulicians constituted the most important heretical group in Asia Minor during the middle Byzantine period, and it was on them that Nina G. Garsoïan put the emphasis in her paper, “Indigenous Minorities in the Byzantine Empire” printed in the present volume. In Miss Garsoïan’s view Paulicianism was not a frontier movement, nor was it ethnic or social in character. Its

roots lay in the main stream of Byzantine thought.

That the monk was one of the most important elements in the society of Byzantium is, of course, universally acknowledged. But what was the actual geographical distribution of monasteries? How large, in terms of the number of monks they sheltered, were they? And what was the total number of monks at any one period, for example, in the year 1000? These were some of the questions which Peter Charanis, in his paper, “The Monks as An Element in Byzantine Society,” tried to answer. Charanis also described the social background of the monks and examined the basis of their influence, the extent of their education, the social abuses of which they were guilty, and the social services they rendered. In addition, he tried to answer the question: To what extent were monasteries centers of education and learning? He concluded his paper, published in the present volume, by pointing out the historical significance of the survival of the monk into the Turkish period.

Five months after the Symposium one of its distinguished participants passed away. The death of Romilly J. H. Jenkins was a shock; more important, it is a serious loss to Byzantine studies. He wrote well, and, if some of his writings were controversial, that quality served only to stimulate further research. Jenkins was never dull. At the Symposium he spoke on the subject of “The Common People.” He put his emphasis on two points: the multiracial character of the population of the Empire, stressing particularly the Slavic and Armenian elements; and the miserable conditions under which the populace lived. To make the second point more vivid, he drew some interesting comparisons with situations in England.

Byzantine society was predominantly agrarian; in other words, agriculture was its most important economic activity. How the agriculture of the Empire evolved and how it was adjusted to changing conditions was described by John L. Teall, whose paper bore the title, “Byzantine Society: Some Comparisons” and is printed in the present volume. The best summary of Teall’s paper is the author’s own: “. . . the foregoing study of the relations between men and land

has shown that the agricultural tradition is almost a paradigm of Byzantine civilization. Rooted in the Hellenistic world, it survived in good order the anarchy of the third century after Christ. Embodied in agricultural treatises written in the Greek tongue, it seems to change little after the sixth century in its learned or theoretical aspects. Yet it would be a profound error to deduce stagnation or retrogression in practice from immutability in theory. New technologies developed during the seventh century from late Roman experiments. With the use of an abundant and more amenable labor force, and under the dictates of necessity, old traditions were put to more effective use in those very regions where centuries of experiment and adaptation had created them."

Teall's paper and the concluding remarks by the director which immediately followed it, brought the Symposium to a close.

The 1969 Symposium was the first to be held after the death of Mrs. Mildred Barnes Bliss, co-founder, with her husband, of Dumbarton Oaks as a center for humanistic studies, and it was, therefore, most gratifying to all those who attended, particularly those whose connections with Dumbarton Oaks reached back for many years, that the privilege of honoring Mrs. Bliss was provided through the request of Mr. John S. Thacher that participants and audience alike stand and observe a moment of silence in her memory.

The Symposium was organized and directed by Peter Charanis.